

SOLON

*Salamis**

- 1 I bring my own dispatch from lovely Salamis,
adopting ordered verse instead of speech.
- 2 In that case I would rather be from Sikinos
or Phlegandros,* no Athenian,
for soon the word would go about, 'He's one of
those
Athenian Salamis-abandoners.'
- 3 Let's start for Salamis, fight for the lovely isle
and free ourselves from terrible disgrace.

Other political poems

- 4 Our state will never fall by Zeus's ordinance
or the immortal blessed gods' intent:
such a stout-hearted guardian, she of the mighty
sire,
Pallas Athene, holds her hand above:
but by their foolishness the citizens themselves
seek to destroy its pride, from avarice,
with the unprincipled mob-leaders, who are set
to suffer badly for their great misdeeds.
They know not how to prosper modestly, enjoy
in festive peace the happiness they have.

and they grow wealthy by unrighteousness.
[When wicked men . . .]
and, sparing neither sacred property
nor public, seize by plunder, each one what he
can,
careless of Righteousness's august shrine—
the silent one, who knows what is and has been
done,
and comes at last to claim the payment due—

this aims a sure blow at the whole community,
 and soon it comes to wretched slavery
 which rouses war from sleep, and strife within the
 clan,

and sunders many from their lovely youth.
 For if men injure their own people, they soon find
 their lovely city scarred and faction-torn.

Among the populace these evils roam at large,
 and many of the poor folk find themselves
 in foreign lands, sold into slavery and bound
 in shameful bonds . . .

And so the public ill comes home to every man:
 the yard doors are no more disposed to hold;
 it leaps the high wall, and it finds him out for sure,
 though he take refuge in his inmost room.

This lesson I desire to teach the Athenians:

Lawlessness brings the city countless ills,
 while Lawfulness sets all in order as is due;
 many a criminal it puts in irons.

It makes the rough smooth, curbs excess, effaces
 wrong,

and shrivels up the budding flowers of sin;
 it straightens out distorted judgements, pacifies
 the violent, brings discord to an end,
 brings to an end ill-tempered quarrelling. It makes
 all men's affairs correct and rational.

4a I mark—and sorrow fills my heart upon the sight—
 the eldest country of Ionia*
 listing.

4c And as for you, who now have all the wealth you
 want,
 make the stern spirit gentler in your hearts,
 adjust to moderation. We will not accept
 this state of things, nor will it work for you.

5 The commons I have granted privilege enough,
 not lessening their estate nor giving more;
 the influential, who were envied for their wealth,
 I have saved them from all mistreatment too.

- I took my stand with strong shield covering both
sides,
allowing neither unjust dominance.
- 6 Thus would the commons and its leaders best
accord,
not given too free a rein, nor pushed too hard.
Surplus breeds arrogance, when too much wealth
attends
such men as have no soundness of intent.
- 7 Hard to please everyone in politics.
- 9 As from the cloudbank comes the storm of snow or
hail,
and thunder follows from the lightning flash,
exalted men portend the city's death: the folk
in innocence fall slave to tyranny.
Raise them too high, and it's not easy afterwards
to hold them. Now's the time to read the signs.
- 10 A short time now will show the Athenians how
mad
I am,* when truth comes out for all to see.
- 11 If by your own fault you have suffered grief and
harm,
put no part of the blame upon the gods.
You raised these men up,* by providing
bodyguards,
and that's why wretched slavery's your lot.
Your trouble is, each of you treads the fox's way,
but your collective wits are thin as air.
You watch a crafty fellow's tongue, and what he
says,
but fail to look at anything he does.
- 12 It's by the winds the sea's disturbed: if nobody
stirs it, it stays of all things best-behaved.
- 13 Bright daughters of Olympian Zeus and Memory,
Pierian Muses, hearken to my prayer.
Grant me that I have fortune from the blessed
gods,
and good repute from all men all the time;

may I be honey to my friends, gall to my foes,
honoured on sight or feared respectively.

Wealth I desire, but not to hold unrighteously,
for surely sometime retribution comes.

The riches that the gods give are dependable

from top to bottom of the storage jar,
but those that mortals cultivate with violence

come awkward and unwilling at the call
of crime, and soon are tangled in calamity,

which from a small beginning grows like fire,
a trifling thing at first, but grievous in the end,
for mortal violence does not live long.

Zeus supervises every outcome. Suddenly

like a March wind he sweeps the clouds away,
a gale that stirs the billowing ocean to its bed

and ravages the tidy fields of wheat
before ascending to the gods' high seat in heaven,
and then, behold, the sky is clear again:

the strong sun shines out on the fertile countryside
in beauty; not a cloud remains to see.

Such is the punishment of Zeus. He does not flare
at every insult, like a mortal man,

but all the time he is aware whose heart is marked
with sin, and in the end it shows for sure.

One pays at once, another later; and if some
escape the gods' pursuing fate themselves,
it comes sometime for sure: the innocent will pay—
their children, or their later family.

Whether of high or low degree, we mortals think
our various vanities are running well
until some blow falls; then we moan. But up to then
we take fond pleasure in our empty hopes.

Whoever is oppressed by comfortless disease
gets the idea he will return to health.

A man of low esteem imagines it is high;
an ill-shaped man is proud of his good looks;
propertyless, and in the grip of poverty,
he still has fancies of acquiring wealth.

They bustle on their different ways: one roams the
sea

hoping to bring some profit home from trade,
tossed by tempestuous winds where fishes wait
below,

with no concession made to life and limb.
Another carves the soil—his business is the
plough—

and slaves away till fruit-time ends the year;
another's learnt Athena's and Hephaestus' craft,*
and earns a living by his handiwork.

Another has been taught the Olympian Muses'
boon,

skilled in the rules of lovely poesy;
another one the lord Apollo's made a seer,
who sees disaster coming from afar,
if he is favoured by the gods; but what is doomed
no augury or sacrifice averts.

Others are healers, Paeon's office, well resourced
in drugs: they too can give no guarantees.

Often a minor pain becomes an agony
that cannot be relieved by soothing drugs,
whereas another, crazed by terrible disease,
under the doctor's hands is quickly cured.

Fate brings to mortal men both good and ill: the
gifts

the immortals give are inescapable.

There's risk in every undertaking. No one knows,
when something starts, how it will finish up.

One man makes noble efforts, but despite them
all

falls into unforeseen calamity;
another handles ill, yet God gives him complete
success, freed from his folly's consequence.

But as to wealth, no limit's laid down clear for
men,

since those among us who possess the most
strive to earn double. Who could satisfy them all?

Remember, profit's in the immortals' gift,
but loss's source is in men's selves: when sent by
Zeus

to punish them, it comes to each in turn.

- 14 Nor yet is any mortal fortunate, but all
are wretched that the sun looks down upon.
- 15 For many curs are rich, and men of class are poor,
but we'll not take their riches in exchange
for our nobility, which always stays secure,
while wealth belongs to different men by turns.
- 16 But wisdom's hidden formula, which holds the key
to all things, is the hardest to discern.
- 17 The gods' intent is hidden every way from man.
- 18 As I grow old I'm always learning more.
- 19 (*To Philocyprus, king of Soloi in Cyprus*)
But now I wish you many years of life and rule
in Soloi here, you and your family:
to me may Cypris* of the violet garland grant
a safe, swift voyage from this famous isle.
Favour and glory on this settlement may she
bestow, and fair return to my own land.
- 20* 'I pray my death may catch me at threescore
years'?
If you'll still listen to me, take that out—
don't mind me having wiser thoughts than
you—
and change it, Ligyastades, and sing,
'I pray my death may come at fourscore years.'
- 21 Nor may my death come unlamented: when I die,
I want to leave my friends with grief and groans.
- 22a And please tell tawny-haired young Critias* to
heed
his father—he'll be taking no bad guide.
- 23 Happy the man who has his sons, his hounds,
his horses, and a friend from foreign parts.
- 24 Equally rich is he who has abundancy
of silver, gold, and acres under plough,
horses and mules, and he that only has the means
to eat well, couch well, and go softly shod,
and by and by enjoy a lad's or woman's bloom,
with youth and strength still his to suit his need.

This is a man's true wealth: he cannot take all those possessions with him when he goes below.
No price he pays can buy escape from death, or grim diseases, or the onset of old age.

25 While youth's delight still flowers, and one loves a lad,
sweet lips and thighs the object of desire.

26 But now I like the gods of love and wine and song
and what they do for human happiness.

27 A boy, an ungrown child, in seven years puts forth
a line of teeth and loses them again;
but when another seven God has made complete,
the first signs of maturity appear.

In the third hebdomad he's growing yet, his chin
is fuzzy, and his skin is changing hue,
while in the fourth one, each achieves his peak of
strength,

the thing that settles whether men are men.

The fifth is time a man should think of being wed
and look for sons to carry on his line;
and by the sixth he's altogether sensible,
no more disposed to acts of fecklessness.

With seven hebdomads and eight—fourteen more
years—

wisdom and eloquence are at their peak,
while in the ninth, though he's still capable, his
tongue

and expertise have lost some of their force.

Should he complete the tenth and reach the
measured line,

not before time he'd have his due of death.

28 There I dwelt
at the Nile's mouth, hard by Canopus' shore.

29 Poets say much that's false.

30 Rulers must be obeyed, however right or wrong.

31 First let us pray to Zeus, to Kronos' son the king,
to grant these laws success and high prestige.

32 (*To Phocus*)

If I have spared
my country, if I've not disgraced my name
by grasping brute force and dictatorship,
I'm not ashamed: this way I think I'll win
more people over.

33

I know many people say
'Solon is a stupid fellow, not a man who thinks
ahead:
God has offered him a fortune, but he hasn't taken
it.
There he had the prey encircled, but he didn't
close the net—
lost his nerve, no doubt about it, and his common
sense as well.
I'd not mind, if I'd seized power and the city's
lavish wealth
and become the lord of Athens even for a single
day,
being flayed to make a wineskin, with my family
wiped out.'

34

Others came along for plunder. They had hopes of
being rich,
every one of them expecting he would make his
fortune there
and that I, for all my cooing, would reveal a harsh
intent.
After those vain calculations now they're furious
with me,
and they all look sideways at me, just as if I were
their foe—
wrongly. The decrees I uttered had the blessing of
the gods,
and I took no foolish further measures, since I
have no taste
by dictator's force to . . . or to see our fruitful
land
portioned out to good-for-nothings equally with
men of worth.

36

Those aims for which I called the public meeting—
which of them, when I stopped, was still to
achieve?

I call as witness in the court of Time
the mighty mother of the Olympian gods,
dark Earth, from whom I lifted boundary-stones*
that did beset her—slave before, now free.

And many to Athena's holy land
I brought back, sold abroad illegally
or legally, and others whom their debts
had forced to leave, their speech no longer Attic,
so great their wanderings; and others here
in ugly serfdom at their masters' mercy
I set free. These things I did in power,
blending strength with justice, carried out
all that I promised. I wrote laws for all,
for high and low alike, made straight and just.
But if another man had got the goad,
someone imprudent or acquisitive,
he'd not have checked the mob. If I'd agreed
to what the opposition favoured then,
and then to what the other party thought,
this city would be mourning many dead.
Therefore I turned to guard my every side,
a wolf at bay amid a pack of hounds.

37

If I must spell out where the mob's at fault,
they never would have dreamt what they have
now

.
while all the bigger and the stronger men
would then approve of me and call me friend.
For if another man had got the goad,
he'd not have checked the mob, or been content
until he'd churned the milk and lost the cream.
I marked the frontier in the No Man's Land
between these warring parties.

38

. . . they drink; and some of them eat cakes,
some bread, and others pastries mixed with lentils.
Nor are they lacking any sort of bake

that the dark earth provides for mortal men,
but everything is freely there at hand.

39-40

Some run for the mortar,
others for pickles, or for vinegar,
or pomegranate-seeds, or sesame.

Solon

Salamis: this poem originally contained about 100 lines. In it Solon urged the despondent Athenians not to give up the struggle with Megara for retention of Salamis; he represented himself as a herald arrived from the island. We are told that the exhortation was effective and that Salamis was duly recovered.

- 2 *Sikinos or Phlegandros*: petty Aegean islands.
- 4a *the eldest country of Ionia*: Ionia covers Athens and the surrounding region (Attica), Euboea, most of the islands of the central Aegean, and most of the Greek colonies on the coast of Anatolia. Athens claimed to be the earliest inhabited.
- 10 *how mad I am*: some of Solon's political opponents had impugned his sanity.
- 11 *You raised these men up*: the authors who quote these lines supposed the reference to be to the dictatorship of Pisistratus, which began in about 561. But Solon speaks of plural tyrants—perhaps some earlier junta of which we know nothing.
- 13 *Athena's and Hephaestus' craft*: these were patron deities of craftsmen, at Athens especially of potters.
- 19 *Cypris*: the goddess of Cyprus, Aphrodite.
- 20 Solon quotes and criticizes a line of Mimnermus (6. 2), who appears to be still alive. The name by which he is addressed, Ligystades, may mean 'melodious singer'.
- 22a *Critias*: son of Solon's brother Dropides, and a great-great-grandfather of Plato.

36 *from whom I lifted boundary-stones*: Solon had helped those in the poverty trap by a general cancellation of existing debts. The boundary-stones in question had marked mortgaged land.